

George Z. French on grounds he had not lived in the county for twelve consecutive months. Assisting Strange were Wilmington attorneys John D. Bellamy Jr., George Rountree, Junius Davis, and P. B. Manning. French's attorneys, A. G. Ricaud and Egbert K. Bryan, made it clear to the Democrats that they would not lose the election without a fight. Despite a well-organized argument by Rountree, the Democratic election board ruled in favor of French and declared the election valid. Following on the heels of the loss, the Democratic Reformers again sought to challenge two local Republican elections for county sheriff and treasurer. After two days of debate and hearings by the Board of Canvassers, the County Board of Commissioners, all Democrats, refused the challenge and accepted Republicans for those two positions. As a result of internal strife, the county's Democrats were unable to unite to defeat the Republicans.¹³

Fusion Reform

Once the newly elected Fusionist legislature met in Raleigh, changes to state and local government began in earnest, most specifically in reforming election laws and county government systems, and in redrawing electoral districts within the state. Progressive legislative measures flew through both the upper and lower houses in 1895. Many of the election laws were designed to favor blacks and Populists and protect their suffrage rights on election days. Some of the new rules forbade employers from firing or threatening employees regarding political issues, made ballots for parties different colors and discouraged all types of coercion around election day. Another reform, focused on county government, made county commissioners

more powerful and reduced the capabilities of justices of the peace. The reforms were seen as beneficial to all parties by the Fusionists, but the Democrats, whose power was substantially limited by the revisions, saw within the changes a tool for future election—officeholding by African Americans. Because popular elections would be more open to black voters, the Democrats understood that more blacks would be elected and decided that this issue was the tool they needed to divide the Fusionist Party in future elections.¹⁴

As the Fusionists made sweeping changes to state government, their changes to local county rule affected New Hanover greatly. As the state's largest city, Wilmington, with its large urban black population, became a battleground between the Democrats and Fusionists. Democrats had created a system of government in the city that minimized the voice of black Republicans through gerrymandered districts and the creation in 1877 of the Board of Audit and Finance to act as a check on the Board of Aldermen.¹⁵ The legislature, under Fusion control beginning in 1895, sought to reverse Democratic controls in Wilmington. One strategy used to eliminate Democratic power over the city's voters was to again amend the city charter.¹⁶

The proposed charter changes were drawn up by Wilmington Republicans, and, in March 1895, were steered through the legislature by Senator Frederick Rice and

¹³ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 401-104; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 9, 1894; November 11, 1894.

¹⁴ There were a few African American legislators in 1895: James Young of Wake County, William Crews of Granville County and Moses Pearce of Vance County. Another African American, Abe R. Middleton, received a patronage position as Assistant Doorkeeper. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 411-414; Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 41-45; Crow, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 234.

¹⁵ *Private Laws of North Carolina, 1876-77*, 230-237.

¹⁶ McDuffie, *Politics in Wilmington*, 416-417.